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MY LOST CHILDHOOD by Alfred Ament

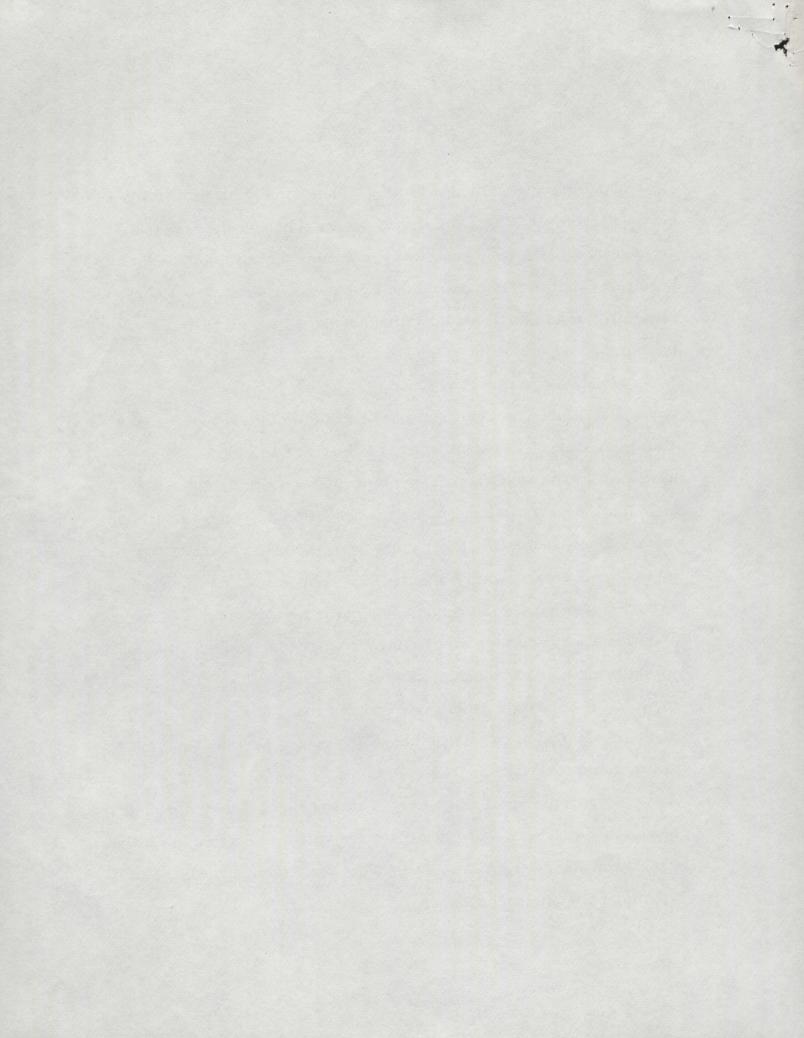
I had always wanted a brother. Hans finally arrived in my life on February 15, 1934. I was 6—years old then and was told he arrived by stork. That year was a bad time for Austria. Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss was assassinated by the Austrian Nazis. I can still remember looking out our apartment window, seeing all those policemen carrying rifles.

We stayed home from school, but soon we had a new chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, who pulled Austria together.

Thank heaven. I looked forward to going back to school. Being locked up in the apartment was no fun for a young boy like me.

As the years passed on, I grew up, attending school and taking piano lessons, like every other child from the ages of 7 to 11. Mom and Dad were very family oriented, as were Opapa and Omama, as I called my Grandpa and Grandma. Omama used to stay at home, and was always cooking and baking. I still remember when she would bring home live carp, and put them in the bathtub. I used to watch them swim, before she knocked them dead for a Friday night meal. Opapa often took me to the Prater, Vienna's largest amusement park for children and adults.

My parents loved the opera. Dad wore a tuxedo and a high black top hat. Mom wore her silk dress with her Persian lamb coat. Our cousin Henry from New York, who was studying medicine in Vienna, very often joined them.



Soon I began to hear about a man in Germany by the name of Adolf Hitler, who was accusing the Jews of being bad news. Dad assured us it would pass. We were not worried, since we lived in Austria. Little did I imagine that storm clouds were in the making over Europe.

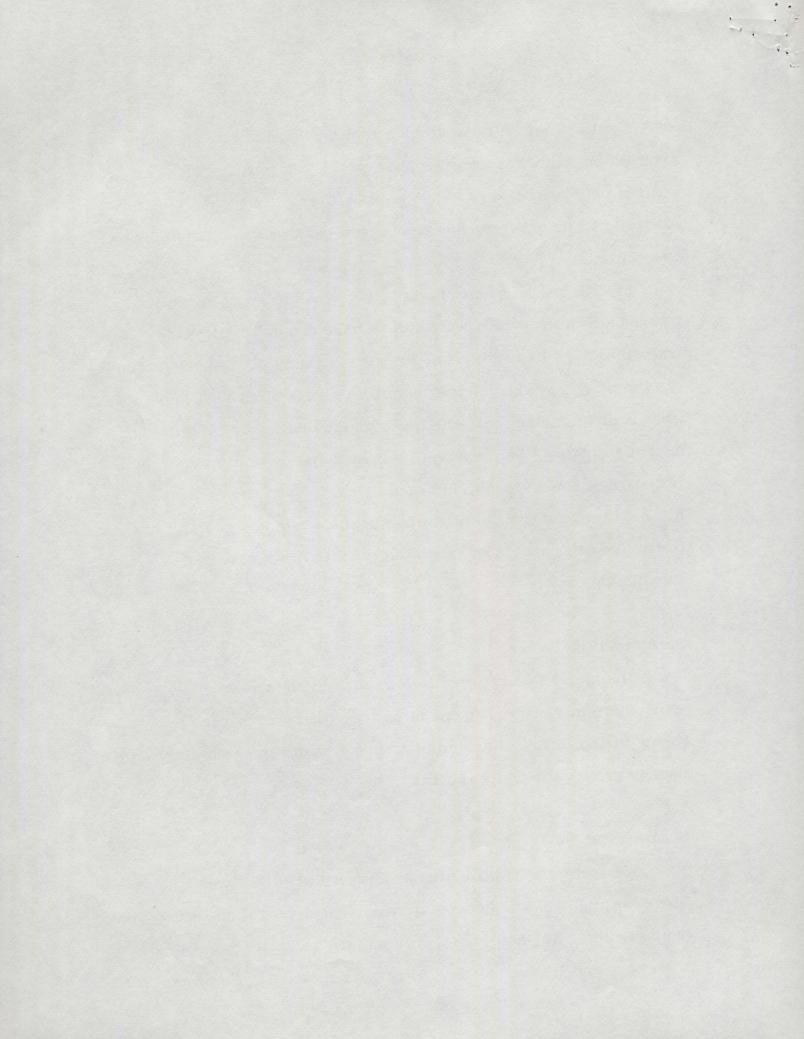
My Mom's sister, my favorite young Aunt Anita and her boy friend Dario from Greece were fun to have around. Always smooching! As Hans got older, he started riding my tricycle around the dining room table. I taught him to race around it. Mom got furious at me. But what the heck, adults did not understand our delight in racing. Dad one day brought home a wind up train and phonograph. We spent many hours playing with the train, and listening to records. We had a live in maid, who cooked and took us to the nearby park. Dad was often absent on business in Yugoslavia.

Summer 1936--

The whole family spent two months in the country, somewhere in Austria. Opapa often took me berry picking and hiking in the forest. Hans and I tried for weeks to catch a fish in a nearby creek, but had no luck.

Summer 1937--

We spent our two months in Hungary at a lake called Balaton. There we met a Jewish couple from Budapest with their eleven year old daughter. By then I was ten years old. I spent many hours with her, and I have to admit I fell for her. As the summer



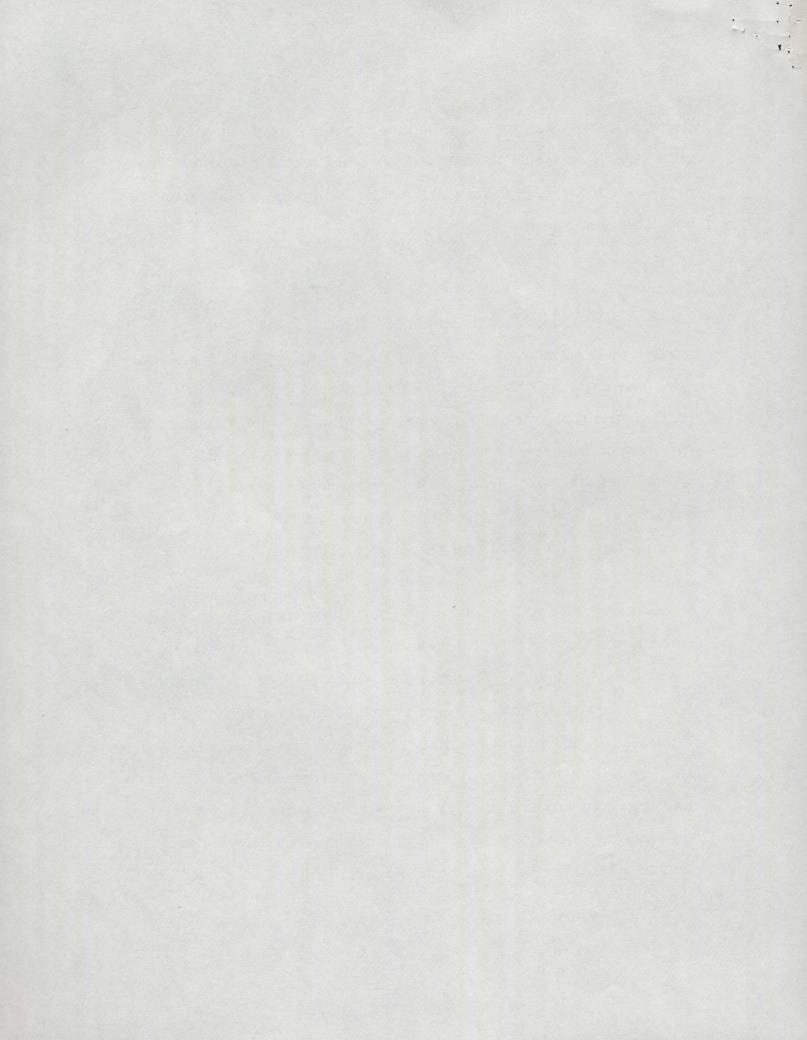
vacation drew to an end, I announced to my parents at the dinner table that I was going to marry her when I grew up. Dad smiled at me, while Mom gave me a stern look. I still have a photograph of both that girl and me.

Spring 1938--

I heard Chancellor Schuschnigg over the loudspeaker in Karlsplatz announcing that Austria would never go with Mr. Hitler. I was coming home from school early that day and had to fight through the mob of people agreeing with him. Arriving home I saw my mother listening to the radio and looking very worried. I wished Dad was home from Yugoslavia, because I feared trouble. By then I was 11 years old. Dad phoned and told Mom not to worry because he would be home if there were problems.

On March 13, 1938, Hitler and his cohorts marched into Vienna. School was cancelled and everything changed. But Dad came home the next day to be with us.

The Austrian flag now had a swastika painted in the middle. People raised their hand in a Roman style salute and said, "Heil Hitler." I thought it funny that those raised arms had been used by the Romans, a fact which I learned from history books. That we had a Roman Emperor in 1938 did not make sense. We had automobiles, electricity, trains and all sorts of modern conveniences which the Romans had not had. How did Hitler come to act like "Caesar"?



Summer 1938--

Our school had been invited to a swimming match. We went, only to be told that Aryans were permitted, but not Jews. The Jewish students left for home and our teacher was somewhat upset. I began to feel threatened by all this and felt this was no place to stay.

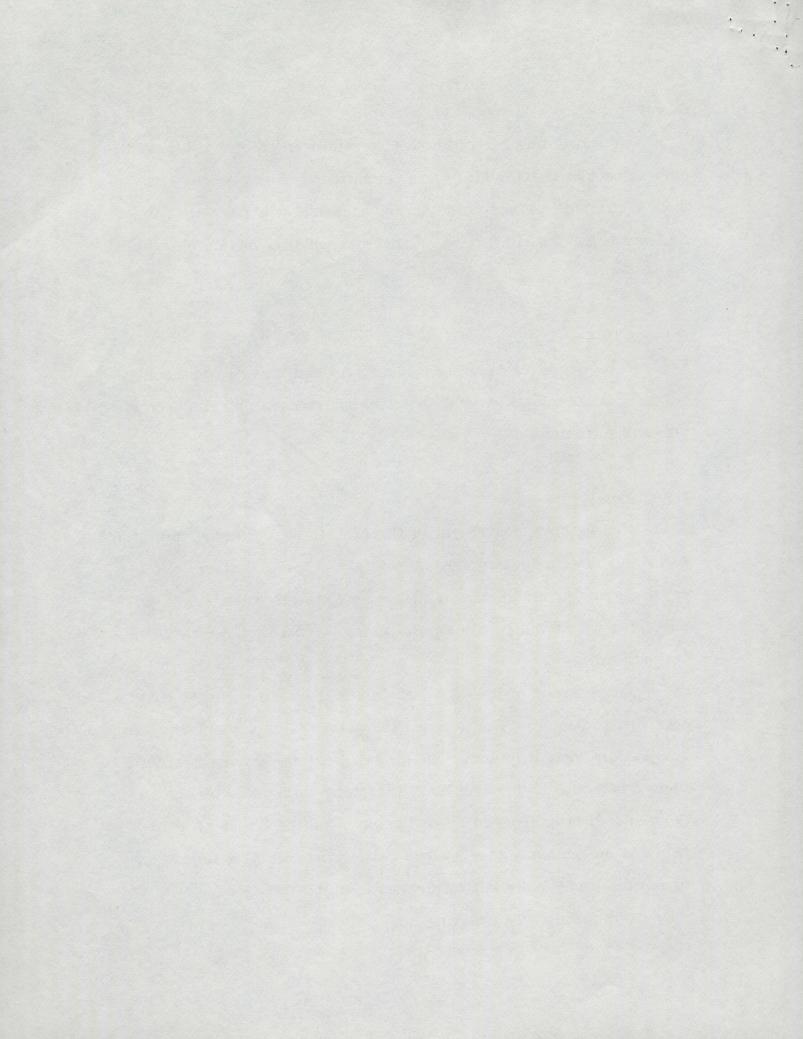
October 1938--

I saw a unit of motorized soldiers headed toward the Czech border. Sudetenland was taken. Another landgrab by the Germans was in the making.

November 1938--

Kristallnacht, the "Night of the Broken Glass," made Mom and Dad and my grandparents realize we had to leave Austria. Our cousin Henry as an American citizen was not being bothered. He suggested we should go to Belgium and wait there for a visa to the United States.

One morning at 3:00 AM two Germans wearing leather coats took Dad to Dachau. He returned two weeks later with horror stories. In Dachau he had met up with his two bachelor brothers, Josie and Willy. Willy had had his factory confiscated by the Germans. I later learned he had come out of Dachau with a "J" branded on his back, done with a cattle iron. Uncle Josie left for England. Uncle Willy left for France. Aunt Anita left for New York City. Our family was breaking up.



End of December 1938--

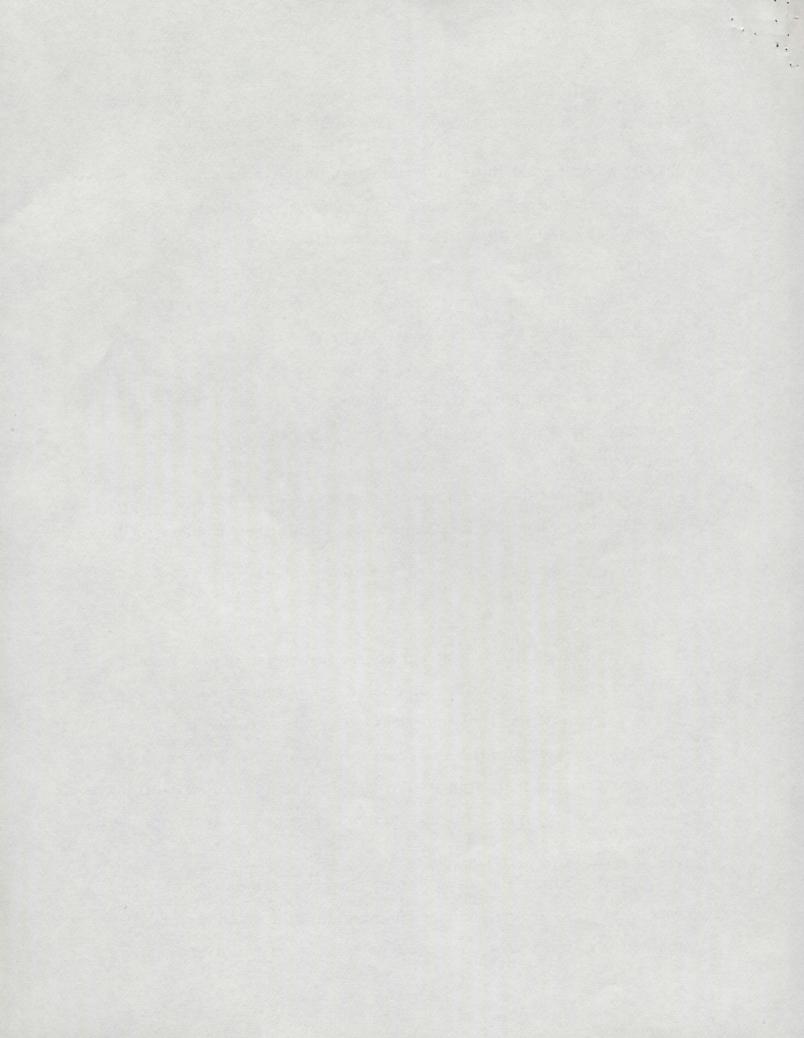
We left for Belgium. My grandparents had crossed the border illegally at an earlier date. We were reunited in Antwerp, Belgium. I began to feel happy and secure to be away from unfriendly Austria, a country which I had loved so much! I attended the local school in Antwerp. What a pleasure it was to be with classmates who did not raise their arms to salute or wear Hitler youth boy scout uniforms. I was able to master the Flemish language and make new friends from home and locally. I was able to see a soccer game or a swimming match like everyone else. I could go to a Saturday afternoon movie show and not see a sign saying "Jews not permitted."

My parents and grandparents applied for an American visa, but there was a waiting list because of the immigration quota set by Congress.

Spring 1939--

We received notice that our cousin Henry had been arrested by the Gestapo on a trumped up charge of smuggling. There was a \$2,000 ransom demand for his release. His father cabled the money from New York City to the U.S. consul in Vienna, who personally put Henry on the train to Antwerp. He spent several days with us and then boarded a ship home. He assured us he would try to speed up our visas.

That summer Hans and I spent our time in a day camp. It was great fun. Prime Minister Chamberlain of England declared jubilantly to the whole world that he had signed a pact with Hitler,



and in giving him Czechoslovakia there would be no war. Peace was assured, according to Chamberlain.

September 1939--

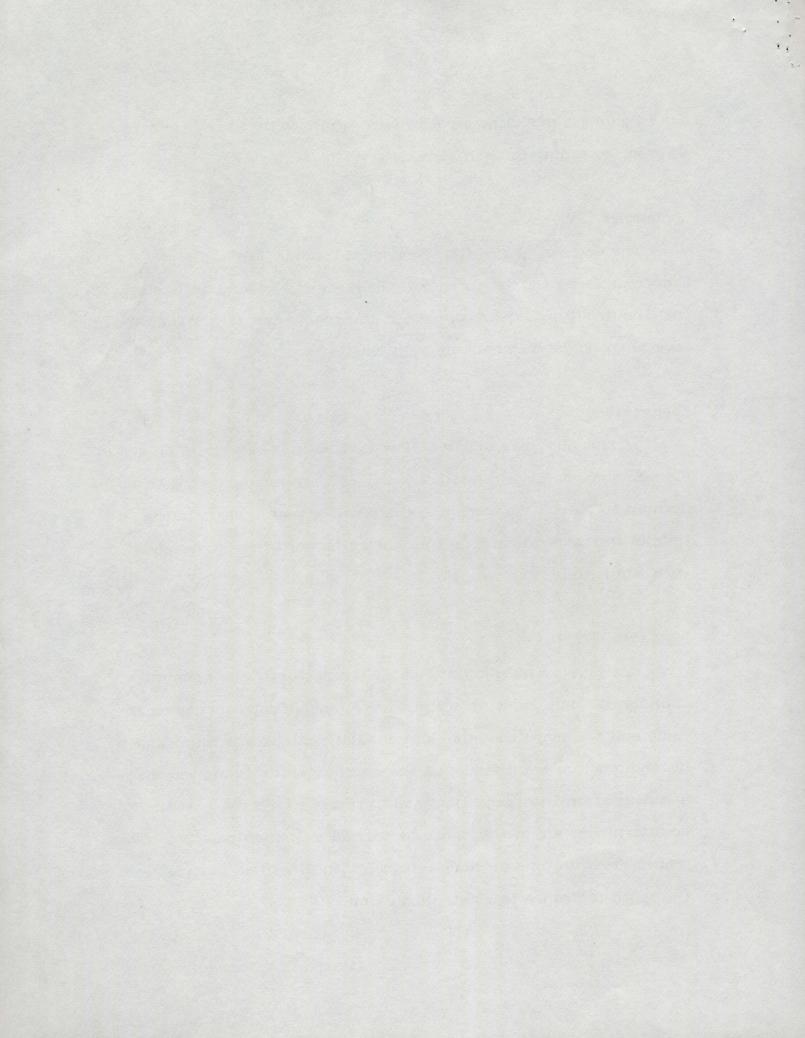
The German armed forces attacked Poland. England and France declared war on Germany. Belgium and Holland declared their neutrality, as did many other European countries. Poland fell several weeks later, unable to fight the Nazis.

Early 1940--

We got our visas at last. Now we had to book passage on a Flemish ship, as English and French ships were getting torpedoed by German U-boats. We were told there was a waiting list! But in spite of this delay, everyone was looking forward to being reunited with Aunt Anita.

May 1940--

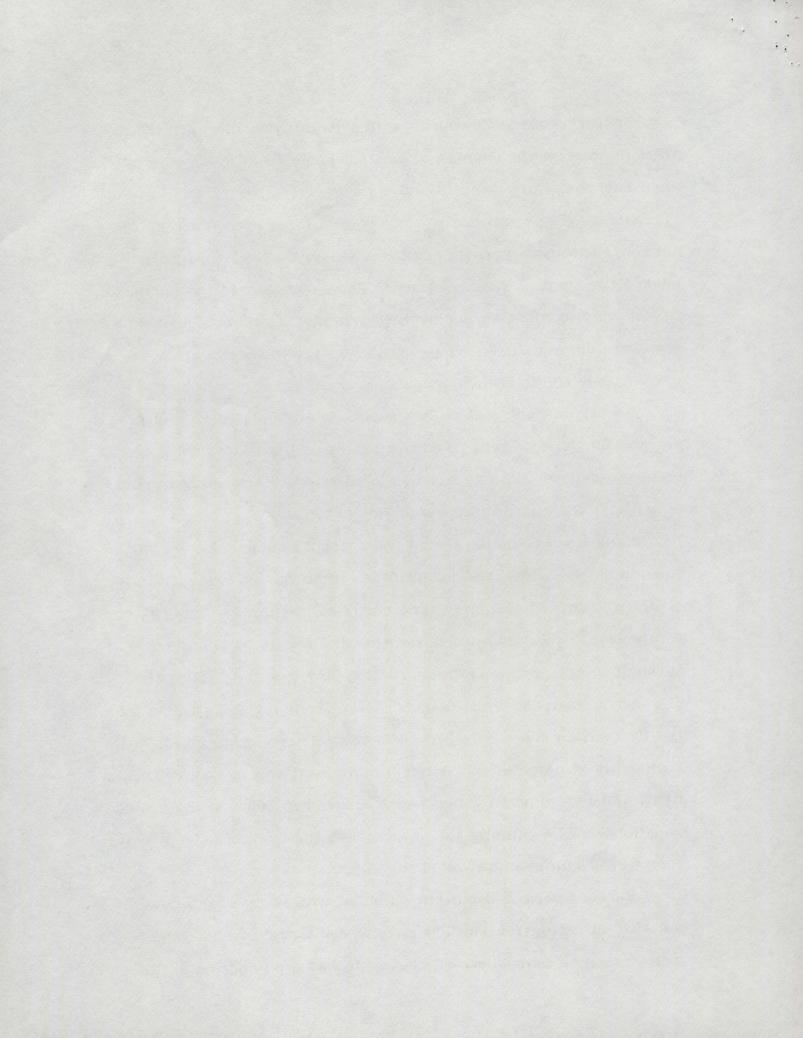
One Sunday morning at 6:00 AM I woke up to the noise of thundering. But, wait—the sun was shining! Opapa turned on the radio and we heard that the Germans have attacked Belgium and Holland. Bombs were falling on the nearby harbor. Now the real war was at our doorstep. Dad had to report to the police station to be interned as an enemy, since he carried a German passport. They transported him and all male refugees with a German passport to the south of France to a detention camp.



British troops were pouring into Belgium with their armored divisions to stem the German invaders. Those "Tommy's" were cute looking fellows, happy and friendly. However, Antwerp had to be evacuated. We packed our belongings on a hired open truck and lumbered through swarms of refugees who were fleeing on foot, toward the coast of Belgium, toward Paris. We passed the burning city of Gent, bombed earlier by the Germans. I realized this was a real war, different from what you saw in the movies.

At one point, French gendarmes examined our passports. Seeing a German passport with a swastika, they placed us under arrest. One lonely French soldier guarded us until a car could pick us up to transport us to Paris. No car arrived. After several hours of waiting, the guard disappeared, so we continued on our own. We passed the town of Dunkirk, and were stopped outside the French town of Calais, which had fallen into German hands. We were cut off from Paris. The Germans had encircled Belgium and cut off our escape plans. We returned to Dunkirk and had to push our way through the retreating British soldiers trying to escape across the Channel to England, while under constant bombing and strafing by the German air force. I observed British soldiers shooting back with their rifles in desperation. What a disarray it was of war equipment and men who only two weeks earlier had believed they could win the war. We finally got to a hotel in the town of Ostend, a sea resort in Belgium, and awaited the outcome.

Earlier Opapa had put our suitcases into storage, and now wheeled our meager belongings on a wheelbarrow he had bought from a farmer somewhere en route. It was a pity seeing all these



poor refugees blocking the road, on their way to nowhere, sleeping outside in the woods or parks. We were lucky. Money could buy us accommodations.

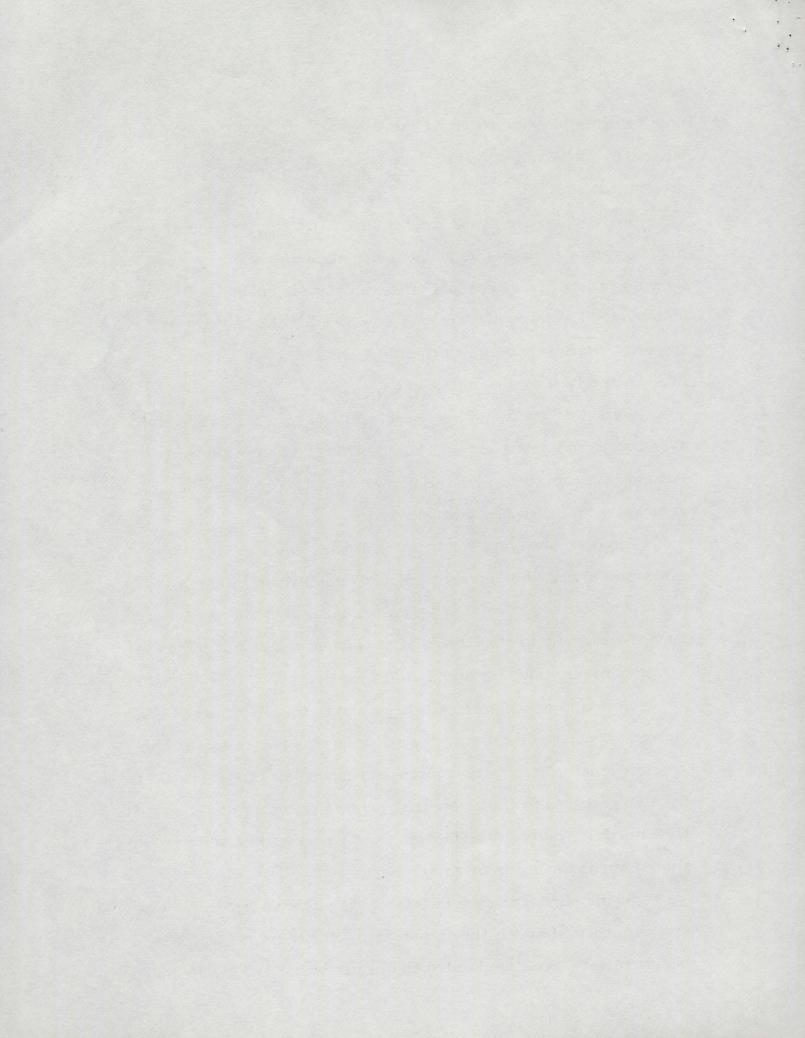
One evening we heard mortar fire. The hotel occupants were told to go into the basement. Heavy fighting was going on outside. Here and there some shrapnel landed in the basement, but no one was hurt. The following morning around 6:00 AM the fighting stopped. We went to our room only to find it in shambles—mortar holes in the beds, walls and ceiling.

We left to go to another place. On the way we had to step over bodies and destroyed war equipment. I saw dead English soldiers being consumed by the flames from their burning armored vehicles. It smelled like burned meat.

The Germans were rolling in with their most modern heavy tanks and armored equipment. Every one of their soldiers rode on a motorcycle with side cars. I began to realize that no country in Europe was going to stop this kind of war machine. Hitler had armed himself while England and France slept.

We found another place to stay across from a damaged church. I observed a German soldier guarding two British prisoners. A priest emerged from the church and served all three water. The German gestured to the priest that his two prisoners had damaged the church. The priest nodded and went back to his church. With that, I turned away in disgust.

During our short stay in Ostend we gathered British biscuits and canned food which the soldiers had left behind, so we had plenty to eat. Soon we located the driver of our truck. He had



been stuck there just like all of us. We went back to Antwerp where we had started from.

France fell and was divided into two sections—the occupied zone and the unoccupied zone under German jurisdiction with the French managing it.

I had my Bar Mitzvah that fall. The synagogue was being guarded by a lonely German sentry. Dad could not be with us that day. He was still in a French detention camp, so Opapa took his place at the synagogue.

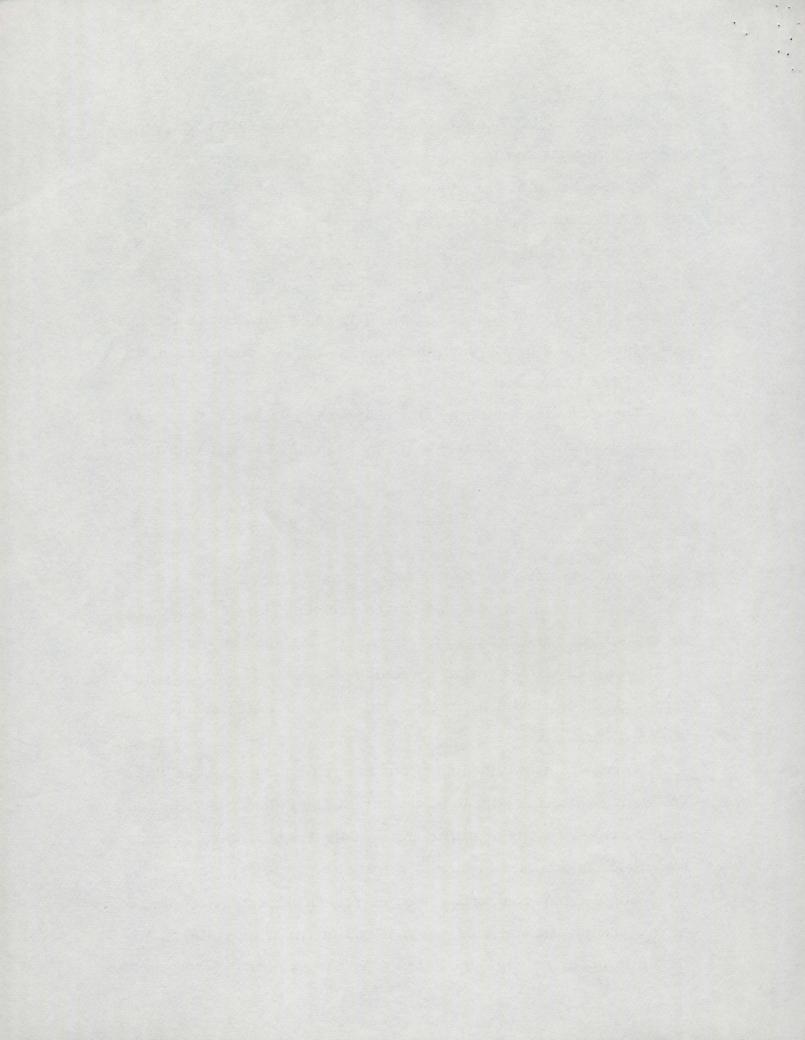
That following winter I got a heavy ear infection. The doctors there in Belgium were unable to help. Penicillin was not widely available.

Spring 1941--

Mom sold some of my stamp collection to feed us all. I was glad she did. Later on she sold her engagement ring. One day she got a postcard ordering all of us to gather our valuables and report to the railroad station within three days to be sent to a resettlement camp. Mom smelled a lie. We all left with our suitcases for occupied Paris.

Paris was a beautiful city, but marred by the swastika flag. We went sightseeing only to discover that the Eiffel tower was being used by the Germans as a listening post for British bombers. Soon we left for unoccupied France to be reunited with Dad.

Our German passports passed all French inspection—so far, so good. Arriving in Marseille, we met Dad at the train station. We flew into his arms. He had gotten a pass from his camp to be with



us. He looked older, but otherwise in good health. My brother Hans was 7 by then and getting very mature for his age. My grandparents arrived several days later. Soon we got settled in an apartment, but it was not as great as the ones we had had either in Vienna or Antwerp. We took the 2nd floor and my grandparents took the 3rd.

Dad was able to be transferred to a camp closer to Marseille to be with us more often. This camp was located in Aix en Provence, about one hour by train from Marseille.

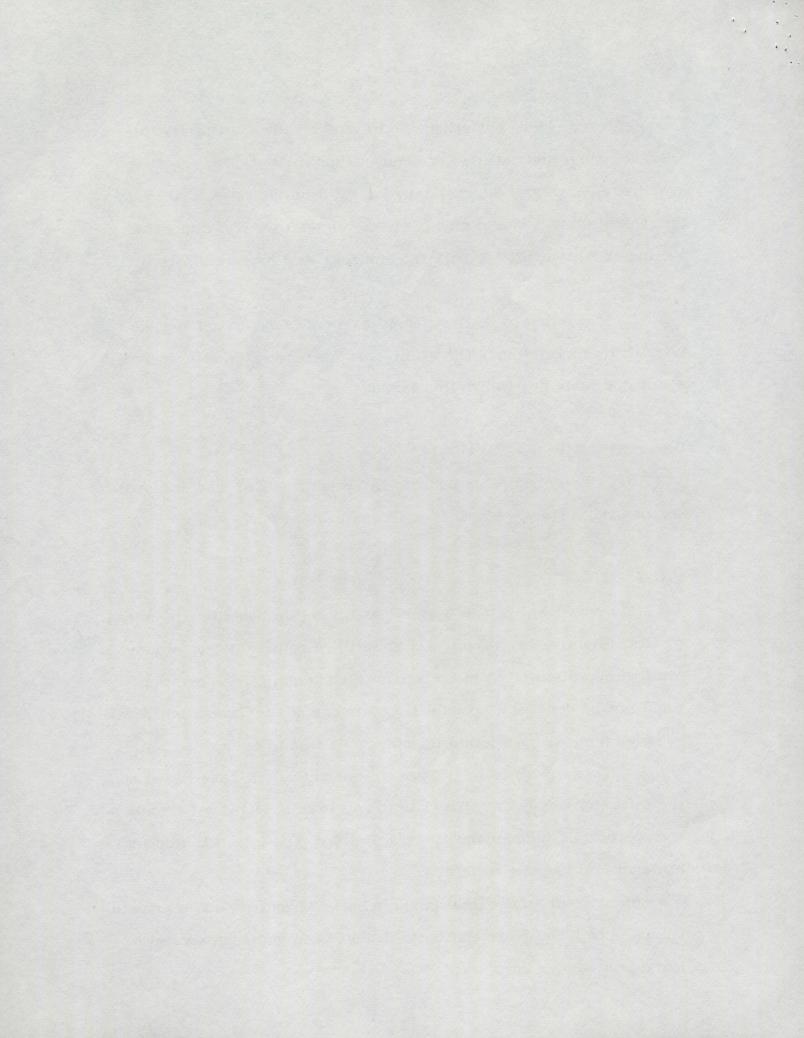
December 1941--

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. America declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy. World War II was in full swing.

1942--

My ears were getting worse. At a local Jewish clinic managed by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), a refugee doctor ordered a mastoid operation to be performed in his kitchen. The operation could not be done in a hospital since anyone of the Jewish faith was being eliminated by a lethal injection. He was to be assisted by his wife, and ether was to be used as an anesthetic. X-rays had shown the infection was getting too close to my brain. Mom was against the operation. Luckily, by the grace of God, the infection stopped, however my hearing suffered.

Hans went to the local public school. I worked with a private tutor, since I had to be spoken to louder. Somehow I managed to learn French.



The war was going great for the Nazis. All Europe was under their control. Only in Russia was the going slow. Napoleon had lost his war there decades ago. Could history repeat itself? No word came from America. All communication with the outside world was at a standstill. We were in for a long wait. Mail was being censored. You had to be careful what you wrote or you got picked up.

Our landlady's daughter fell in love with and married a young French man. He was Jewish and was being hidden by them. The bride was Catholic. Soon they had a child.

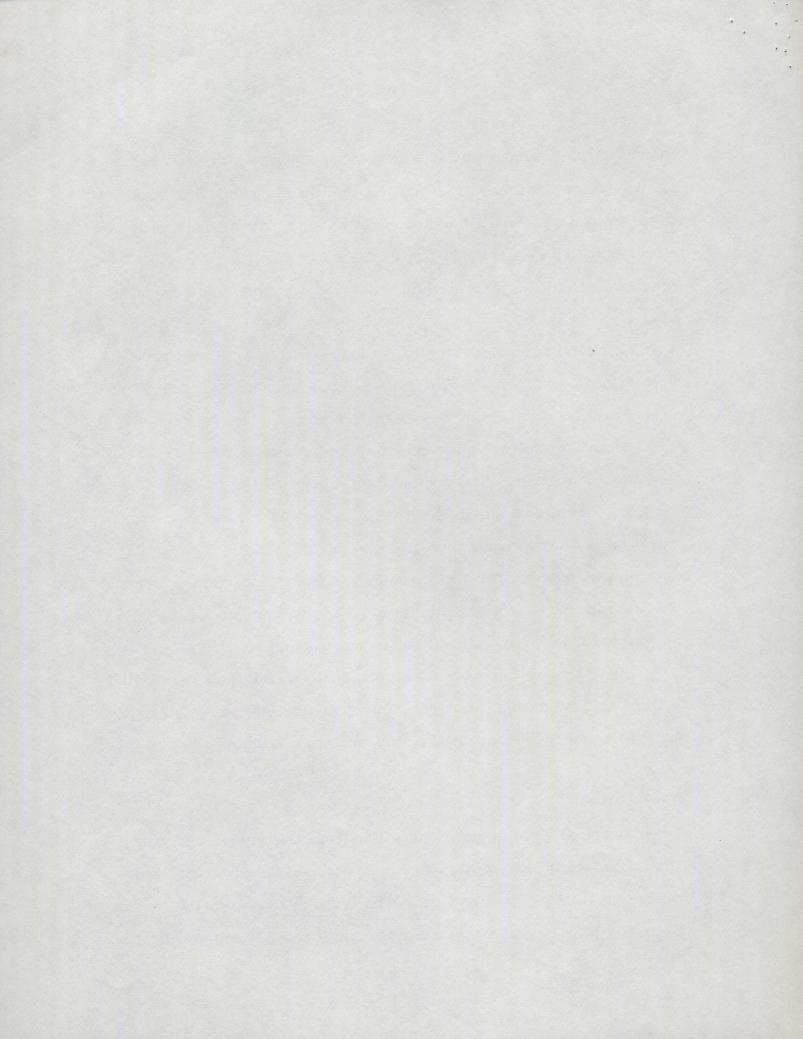
Mom was getting sick—coughing and spitting up blood. She was very run down. The doctor ordered her to stay in bed. She refused. Her desire was to get the whole family to safety for the duration of the war and then to America.

I was pressed into service, doing shopping and running errands for the family. I stood in line for kerosene for our kitchen stove. I purchased black market food. Mom was getting weaker.

Eight year old Hans was shipped off to a children's home, and I went to a home for teenagers. Our grandparents were getting too old to handle us. Mom checked herself into a hospital.

1942-1943--

Dad was shipped somewhere else from the internment camp. The Nazis were being beaten in North Africa. This was good news. Italy was invaded by the Allies. The Germans occupied the rest of France. Now it was a two front war in Europe: Italy and Russia.



The Nazis were creating fear and hardship in France for the Jewish population, as well as for the French.

I stayed at two different country homes. The second was a century-old chateau, a charming castle in the country. I was assigned to kitchen duty and wood delivery for the old-fashioned cooking stove.

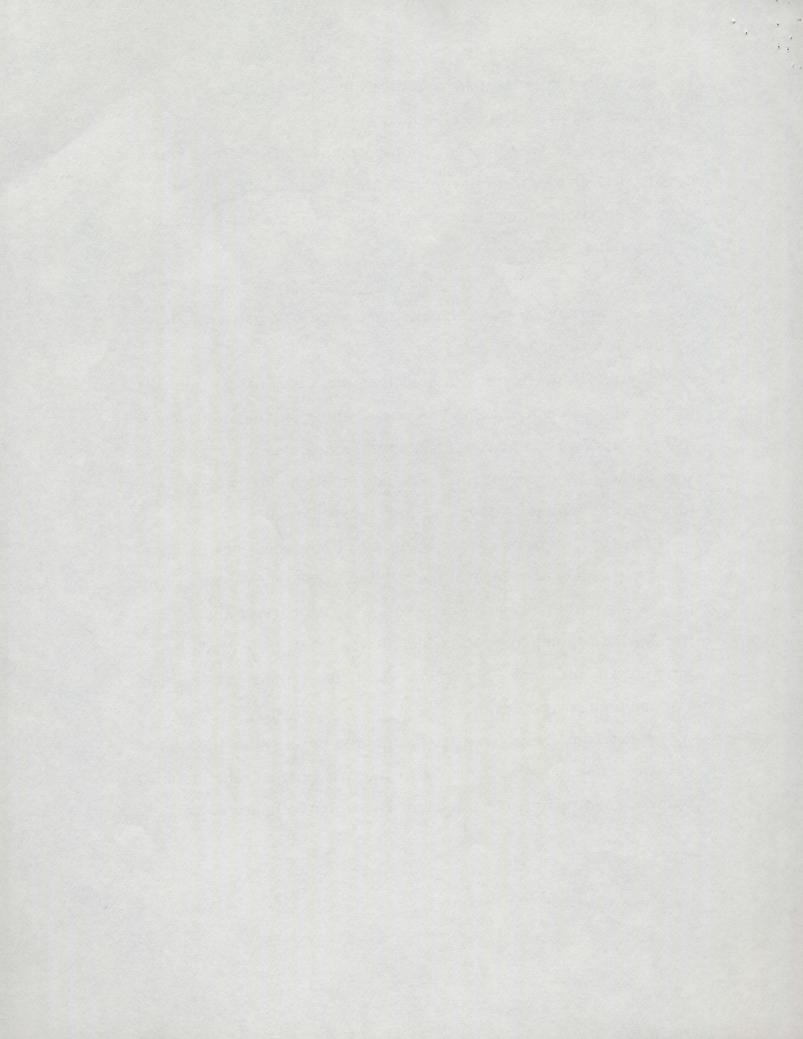
Food was rationed, so I was always somewhat hungry.

However, working in the kitchen, there were always some leftovers for us. The time sure passed.

Letters from Opapa indicated that Mom was not getting better. In the fall I got homesick and requested to be sent home to live with my grandparents in Marseille, so as to be near Mom. My suitcase was packed. A friend of mine had left for home last week. I was to leave in a couple of days and just could not wait.

On the day of departure I was told I was going nowhere. I could not believe it. Several hours later I was informed there had been a night round-up and deportation action carried out against the Jewish population of Marseille. I was saved from that unfortunate situation. My friend who had gone one week earlier was never heard of again.

Mom was transferred to the hospital jail because she was Jewish. Several weeks later, with the help of the French, she was sent to a sanitarium not far from where Han's children's home Izieu was.



Winter 1943--

I moved to a farm with two other children. The farmer called us his own. The Nazis were getting worse, raiding children's homes and creating hardship everywhere.

On the farm I learned how to milk cows, clean up the pigsty, etc. I discovered a Model A Ford buried under a haystack in the barn. I got a scolding not to go fishing around in there again or I would be shot by the Germans to whom the farmer was supposed to have turned in his car for their war effort.

The French resistance was fighting back throughout France.

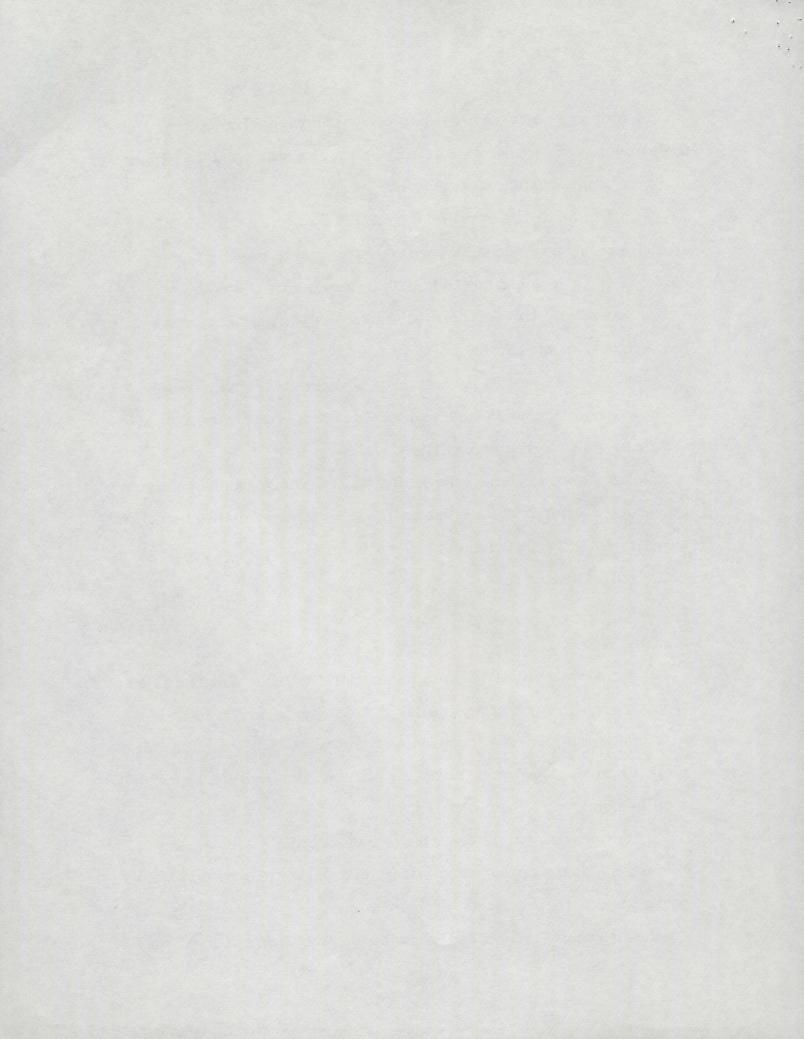
By now I had turned 16 and realized that this was no country in which to wait for the end of the war.

The war was going very badly for the Nazis. Allied bombers flew over our farm quite often on the way to unload their deadly cargo somewhere in Germany. Very often I wished I could be up there with them.

March 1944--

I made a request to go to Switzerland. Uncle Willy had fled from France to Switzerland earlier. A convoy of about 30 children and young adults was assembled and we were outfitted with false identity cards. We rode the train to the border, with a one night stop in Lyon.

As we were riding toward the Swiss border, two German soldiers suddenly appeared to inspect everyone's I.D. cards. One soldier had a metal sign on a chain around his neck with the word "Sicherheitpolizei" (Security Police) on it. His assistant took my I.D.

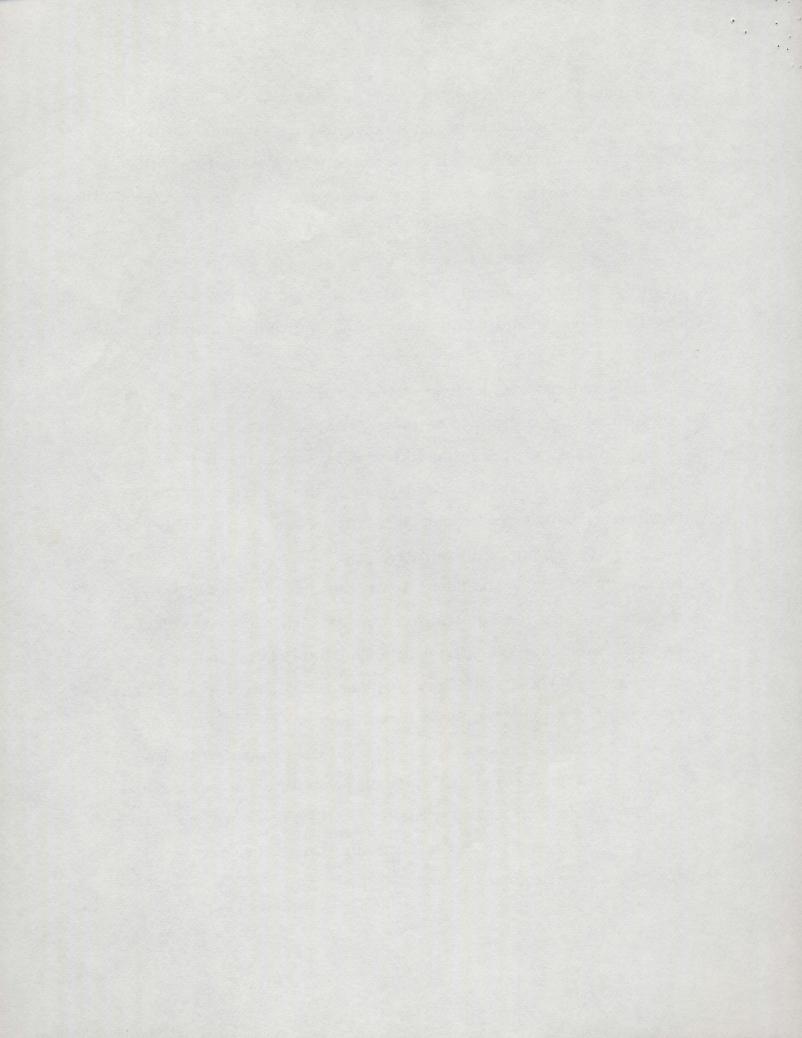


card, snapped his heels together, and handed it to the one with the metal sign. He looked at it and at me, and gave it back to his assistant who in turn gave it back to me with a stern face. The false papers worked, but my heart was in my shoes during that ordeal.

If asked, we were supposed to say we were going to a spring camp for French children. It was a good cover and it worked. A Jewish mother with a baby was arrested and removed from our train.

Around noon we arrived at the border town close to Geneva. We all piled into a truck to be taken to the so-called children's camp. Instead, we linked up with two resistance fighters, who, with machine guns drawn, escorted us to the Swiss border on foot. It was a very well carried out plan. The truck stopped on the highway, pretending to have motor problems. We got off, supposedly to rest in the field. When the coast was clear, we ran toward the Swiss border, scaled a ten foot high barbed wire fence and fell onto Swiss soil. The resistance fighters left after we were safely across. I had ripped my pants and scratched my arms, but that didn't matter. The Swiss border guards' wives fed us milk and bread while we were waiting for a bus to be transported to Geneva.

I spent several months in a villa which was used as a refugee camp. We slept on straw on the floor. Then there was an outbreak of scarlet fever and we had to burn our straw beds, but we got fresh straw to sleep on.



June 1944--

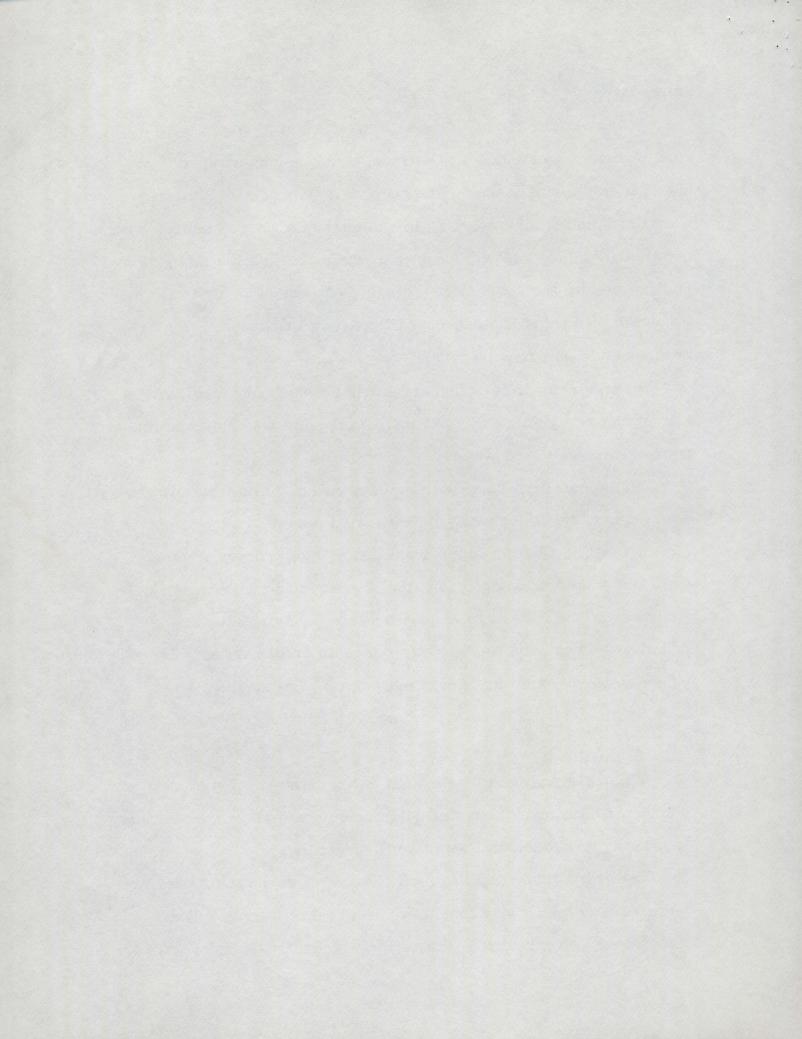
While waiting for my release from the camp, the announcement was made on the radio that the long awaited invasion was taking place on the beaches of France! As that day wore on, I had trouble working in the kitchen. Now or never were my thoughts. My prayers were with the Allied fighting men, dying and fighting on the beaches of France. Forty-eight hours later I breathed with relief, having heard that they had secured the beaches and were moving inland.

In the mean time we observed the French resistance springing into action and giving the Nazis hell. Our camp was only one mile from the border.

Rome had been liberated two days earlier. The Russians were advancing closer to Germany. Now it had become a three front war for Hitler. The tide for Japan was turning too! The villa across from our villa was being readied for German soldiers fleeing the slaughter of the French resistance fighters, who did not take prisoners. That noon another camp inmate and I carried a 30-gallon kettle of soup into the German camp. Seeing those young Germans in their uniforms made me wish I had rat poison in that kettle.

That evening we informed our Swiss camp supervisor that we would not cook for our enemy. He understood and ordered a Swiss mobile army kitchen to be sent to their grounds.

All this while I had not received mail from Hans. At last we were released and I was sent to a live-in school located outside Basel, only two miles from the German border. The Swiss were the



kindest and most helpful people. A specialist from the Swiss Red Cross examined my ears and suggested a hearing aid, which they paid for.

Paris was liberated. The Nazis were retreating on all three fronts. How much longer, I wondered, until I would be able to look for the missing members of my family? Somehow I felt guilty being safe, while they were out there somewhere.

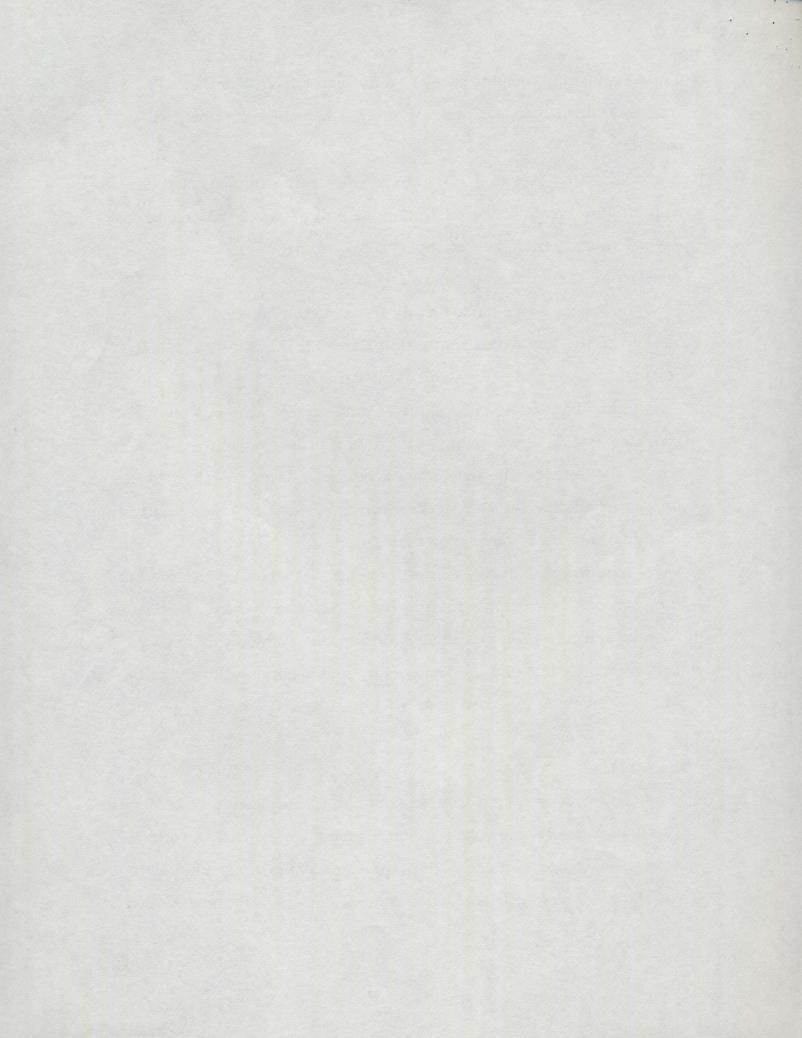
In France Mom passed away in August of tuberculosis. In her last letter she had asked me to find Hans and Aunt Anita. I was getting an uneasy feeling about Hans' whereabouts.

Later in 1944 horrible pictures and stories came out of liberated Poland. Auschwitz, the mass murder concentration camp where the Germans had gassed and burned humans, was uncovered by the advancing Russian forces. Now I realized how Dad and my grandparents must have met their fate.

I visited my Uncle Willy in Lugano. It was a pity to see him living in one room. This man, who in 1938 had owned a factory in Vienna and had been chauffeured around in a limo, was now a broken man. But like me, he was in good spirits and lucky to be alive. I spent many good days with him.

Late 1944--

I was very scared to hear that Hitler's best tank division was breaking through the Allied line and racing toward Antwerp to slice the Allied troops in half. What came to be known as the "Battle of the Bulge" was foiled, thanks to General Patton. This was Hitler's last lunatic try.



Spring 1945--

Outside our schoolhouse I witnessed Germans fighting with the Allied forces two miles away across the Rhine River. The Swiss army was digging in on the German border, not trusting the Nazis nor knowing what they might do next. Hitler had planned to invade Switzerland earlier. On many occasions American planes flew over our schoolhouse by error. Our roof had a large white cross painted on it and the Swiss flag to identify its land. I could see the pilots' faces, since they flew so low. I was told a story about the Swiss flag—a white cross in a red field. Switzerland was a haven in Europe. Everything around it was blood red.

April 1945--

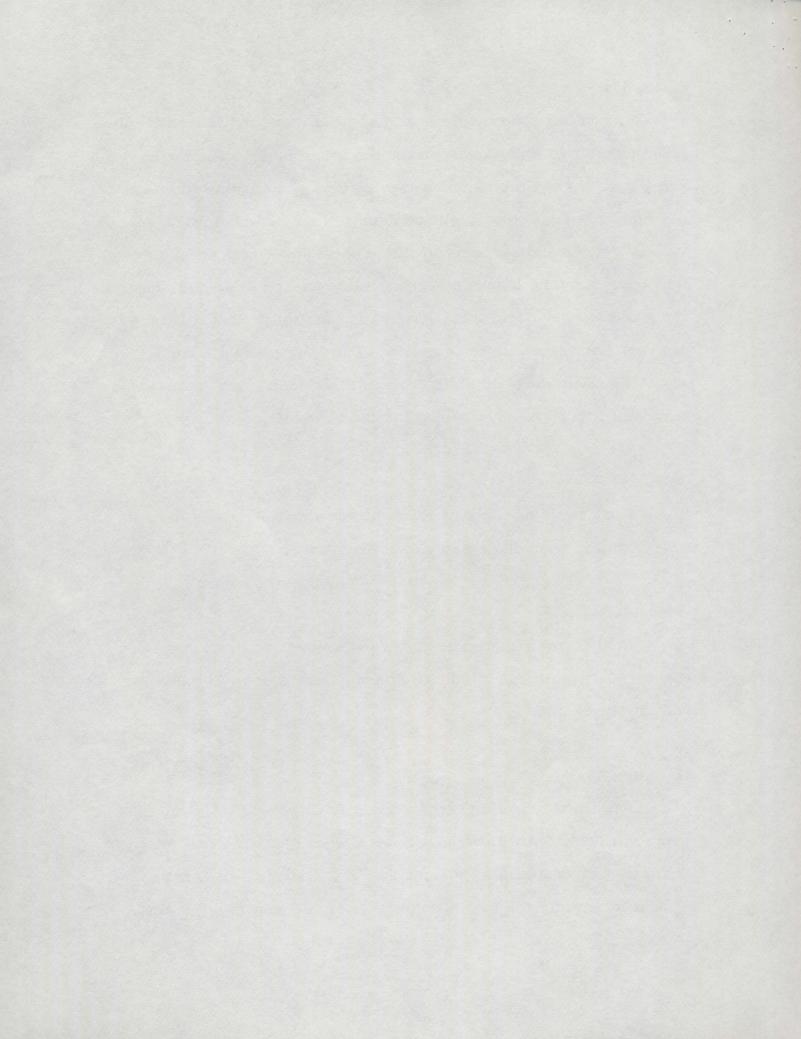
The news was that the Russians were fighting house to house in Berlin and that Hitler had blown his brains out.

May 1945--

Nazi German surrendered. We were overjoyed, as were the Swiss. Germany was in ruins. The war was over in Europe, but not in the Pacific.

Summer 1945--

I finished school and took a train to Geneva to start my apprenticeship with a furrier. Several weeks earlier I had gotten a chill that developed into pneumonia. My first night in Geneva I was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital. I spent two months



there, receiving excellent care. I was very run down, but I had gotten that far and was not about to die at age 17.

I was unable to find out what had happened to Hans and the children of Izieu, except that they had been moved. Neither Aunt Anita nor Cousin Henry were to be found in New York City. Mail was still bad across the ocean. It had to be sent via Portugal.

September 1945--

War with Japan ended after the dropping of the atomic bomb.

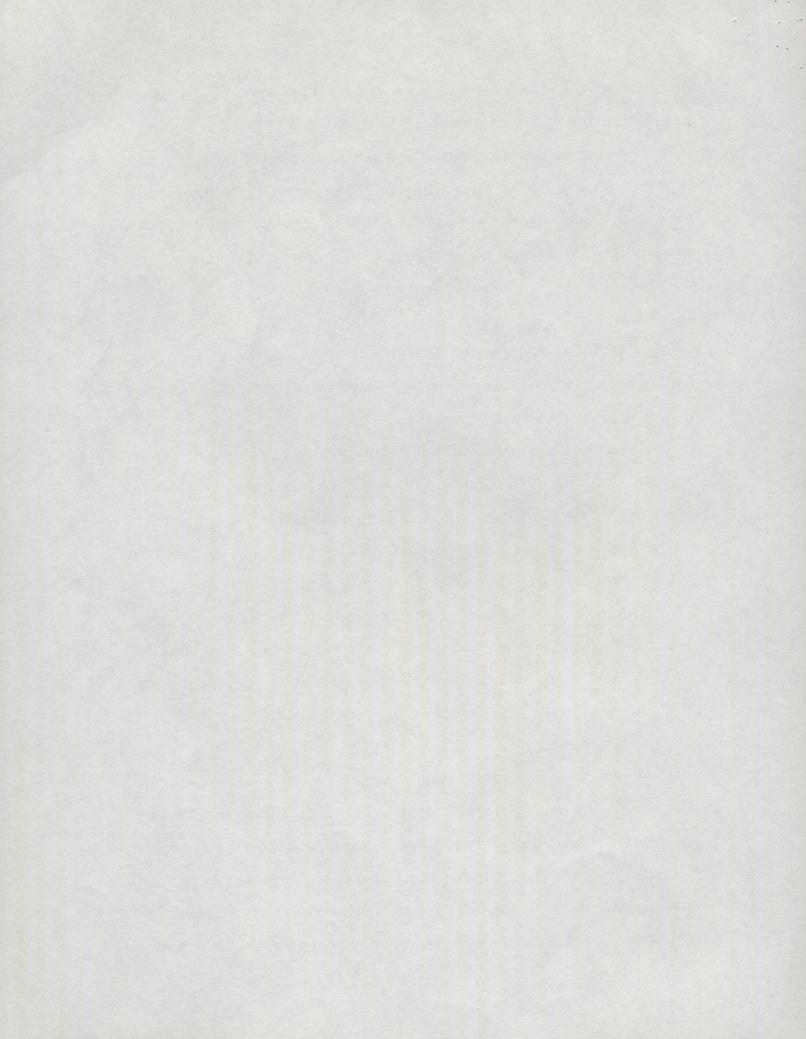
American servicemen were taking 7-day furloughs in Switzerland.

It was a pleasure to watch all this.

Soon the Swiss government began asking all refugees to leave as soon as possible. I signed up for a future transport to Palestine. We were told we might make it or be intercepted by the British navy on the high seas and sent to Cyprus. So what? I decided I'd rather go that route than back to Vienna alone.

Uncle Josie, who had fled to England in 1938, wrote to Uncle Willy in Lugano that he had heard from Aunt Anita. She was married and living in Los Angeles. Soon she and I corresponded and she got me a visa. The Swiss let me remain in the country until my departure day.

I said good-bye to many friends who were on their way to Palestine. I'll never forget 18 year old twin brothers whom I had befriended. They had stayed alive in Auschwitz by feeding corpses into the ovens. They showed me pictures the S.S. had taken of them doing it. By that time I was well informed of the Nazi atrocities, so it did not shock me. I hope they settled in Israel.



May 1946--

I left for Belgium to wait for space on a returning troop ship.

I stayed in Brussels for one month. I visited Antwerp and found the apartment where we had stayed from 1939-1940. It was now under different ownership. The former owners had met their fate like everyone else. I killed time selling dollars on the black market.

Finally I departed by bus for Le Havre, France, to catch our ship. If I hadn't left then, I'd still be there selling dollars on the black market. The harbor was in ruins. Former German soldiers, now POW's, were working to remove the rubble. What a mess it was! A temporary steel platform was used as a harbor.

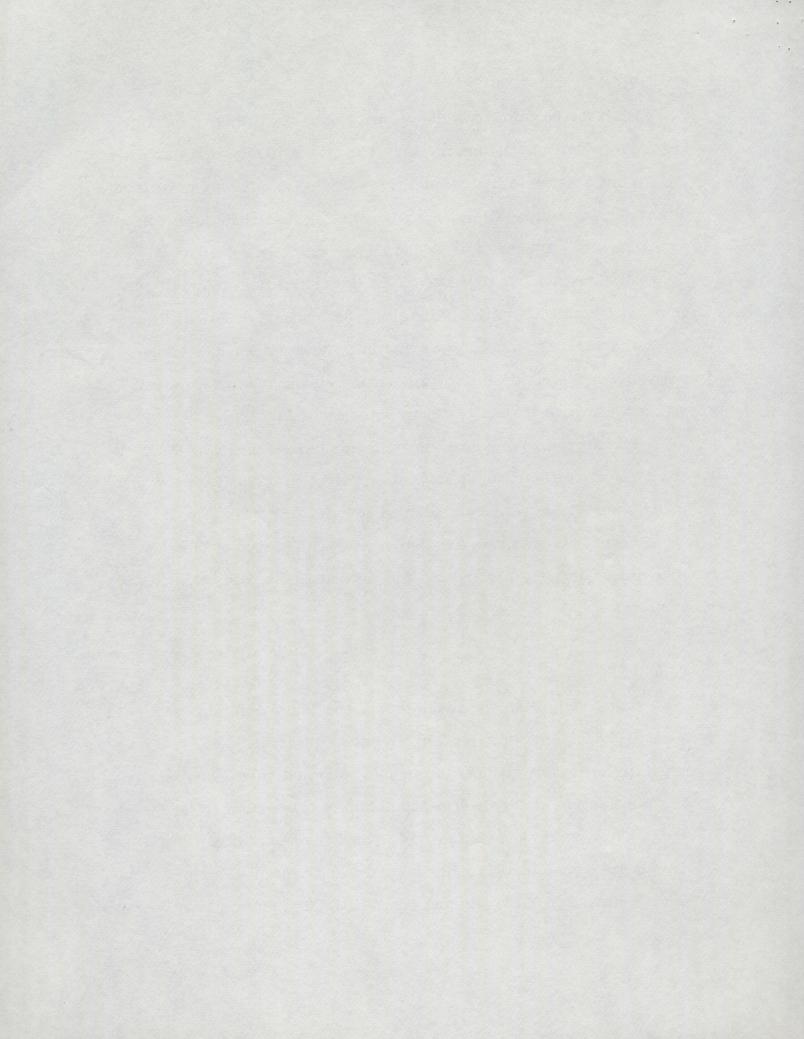
Six days of sailing later our ship stopped outside New York. A coast guard cutter brought several immigration officials on board to process our visas, while we steamed toward New York City.

Soon I saw the long awaited sight of the Statue of Liberty. I had finally arrived in America, but without Hans, Dad, Mom, Opapa and Omama.

Conclusion--

Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the "Final Solution" was hunted down, and kidnapped in Argentina by Israeli agents. He was tried in Jerusalem and hanged in 1961. He had given the order for the deportation of the Jewish population of Marseille in 1943.

Klaus Barbi, the "Butcher of Lyon," was extradited from Bolivia to France in 1983. He was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1987. He had ordered the deportation to Auschwitz



of the 44 children in the children's home Izieu. My brother Hans was one of those children.

As I look back, I cannot help but think of the many brave American boys who gave their lives to liberate Europe from the Nazis. They would have been grandfathers today. I married an understanding girl who bore me two lovely children I am proud of. To this day, I have no desire to set foot on German soil.

I visited Vienna in 1977 with my wife Sue. Vienna was bombed 53 times during the war. 90% of that city was rebuilt and restored to its prewar condition.

The following year we visited Switzerland. I found that country still very charming and friendly. I owe the Swiss my greatest gratitude in sheltering me during the last two years of the war. Had they not done so, I would not be here to write this story.

